

What China's Leaders Fear Most

by MINXIN PEI • JULY 30, 2012

By charging Bo Xilai's wife with murder, China's political leaders have set a dangerous precedent.



The news that Chinese prosecutors have filed formal murder charges against Gu Kailai, the wife of disgraced former Communist Party boss of Chongqing Bo Xilai, has conjured up tantalizing images of a sensational trial at which the dirtiest laundry of the Bo family would be mercilessly aired. But before aspiring writers of a political thriller rush to purchase the rights to the Bo saga, its obvious entertaining value notwithstanding, we need to pause and reflect on one dimension of the Bo story that has not received sufficient attention: [the insecurity](#) of China's top rulers.

While most people understandably cheer the downfall of characters like Bo, arrogant, hypocritical, cruel, and greedy apparatchiks when they are in power, the political implications of their demise and the manner in which they are purged are not those of a morality play. On the contrary, how the powerful lose power and what happens to them afterwards can tell us a great deal about the nature of the political regime in which they thrive and perish. In the case of the current Chinese regime,

the ugly purge of Bo reveals many of its dark sides: corruption, lawlessness, hypocrisy, and ruthlessness. Such qualities of a regime make it illegitimate and undermines its durability.

However, rarely do we view political power struggles from the perspective of a regime insider. As a result, we often fail to appreciate how the insecurity [of top elites](#) constitutes a fatal threat to the very regime that has made and unmade their political fortune.

Before we analyze the degree of insecurity of the ruling elites in contemporary China, it may be useful to refer to another era in which top elites of the Communist Party lived in constant fear for their lives and those of their families — the reign of Mao Zedong from 1949 to 1976. The Maoist regime was a purge machine in perpetual motion. Any member of the party's hierarchy, regardless of his seniority or loyalty to Mao, was dispatched the instant he became a threat to Mao's power.

No rules governed such purges. In nearly all cases, the victims included not only the disgraced official, but also his innocent family members, who were thrown in jail or sent to labor camps.

Indeed, Bo's family story during the Cultural Revolution was a typical case. His father spent a decade in prison. Bo himself was jailed, too, during the Cultural Revolution. His mother committed suicide.

After the end of Maoist rule and the return of political sanity in China in the late 1970s, the party's elders worked very hard to restore the party's unity. One keen insight they drew from the self-destructiveness of the Maoist era was that elite insecurity greatly exacerbated the power struggles at the top. Besides the absence of a due process that could protect the basic rights of the members of the ruling elites, the degree of arbitrariness, unpredictability, and cruelty to which they and their families were subjected was horrific and inhumane. These conditions meant that once a member of the top ruling elite lost power, he would lose everything, including his life and liberty and those of his family members. This made the price of losing power infinite. Thus, elites would fight with the utmost viciousness to avoid losing.

To improve the political security of the party's top elites, Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues devised some elaborate schemes, both formal and informal. The formal rules include specific procedures governing the removal of senior officials. The informal ones include, among other things, no jail time for losers in power struggles and no persecution of their families.

Of course, like Chinese laws, the formal rules were mostly honored in breach. Deng's dismissal of Hu Yaobang, the reformist Party chief, and of Zhao Ziyang, another reformer, violated the Party's

own procedure. But until Deng placed Zhao under 15 years of illegal house arrest in 1989, he had essentially stuck to the rule of no physical harm or loss of liberty for political adversaries.

In the post-Deng era, elite security has declined significantly. Not only has the procedure through which senior officials are removed from office become more opaque, arbitrary, and politicized, but also the price of losing power has increased dramatically. Purges now come with jail sentences, not quiet or comfortable retirement. The loser's family members face imprisonment as well.

The first victim of post-Deng purges was Chen Xitong, a Politburo member and Beijing's party boss who was jailed on corruption charges in 1995. His son was jailed as well. Mr. Chen recently released his memoir. While trying to show that he had nothing to [with the Tiananmen crackdown](#) in 1989, he revealed that his secret trial was perfunctory and he called the proceedings "fascist."

The second high-profile victim was another Chen, Mr. Chen Liangyu, one-time high-flying Shanghai party boss and Politburo member. Like Chen Xitong, Chen Liangyu was felled by corruption charges and sentenced to 18 years in prison.

What [has happened](#) to Bo Xilai and his family thus may not seem unusual. As expected, the decision to try Gu Kailai merely signals that the Communist Party's top leadership has already determined her guilt and punishment. Bo Xilai, now languishing in the Party's infamous shuanggui system (indefinite extra-legal detention), will almost certainly face the same fate as the two Chens.

Some observers may object by saying that purging senior officials on corruption charges is quite different from sacking them because of [ideological disloyalty](#) or factional power struggle, as was the case during the Maoist era. This difference may be technically true but substantively and politically irrelevant. In terms of fostering a dreaded sense of insecurity among the top ruling elites, corruption charges and alleged political offenses are no different.

First, like political offenses, corruption charges can be concocted. The alleged evidence against the two Chens, for example, revealed two far-fetched and weak cases. It is common knowledge that the two Chens fell not because of corruption, but because of their political ambitions and disloyalty. The same could be said of the causes of Bo's collapse.

Second, because China's top elites, who personally or directly may have little involvement in corrupt activities but who all have family members and relatives who engage in questionable or

illegal business deals, no one at the top is absolutely safe. At the moment, the Party seems to have drawn the line at the Politburo Standing Committee level — Politburo members are not safe, but Politburo Standing Committee members enjoy absolute immunity, because purges at the highest level of the Party would be too destabilizing. But since this arrangement is not ironclad, who knows when the Party will decide to go after one of the top nine leaders in the future?

Third, once brought down in a power struggle, even China's top rulers lack minimal legal protection. They cannot pick lawyers or have the ability to challenge the charges against them in an independent judiciary. Their verdict and penalty are typically decided, not by professional judges after the conclusion of the proceedings, but by top political leaders behind closed doors.

What this analysis reveals — and what the case against Bo and his wife shows — is that political security for China's top rulers today has deteriorated so much that, in some crucial ways, they might feel that they are back to the bad old Maoist days. Elite disunity and vicious infighting is now the rule, not the exception. This cannot be reassuring news for a regime ruled by individuals whose daily nightmare is that they will one day become another Bo Xilai.

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